**Opinion**

**Joe Biden: Why I’m going to Saudi Arabia**

By Joe Biden

July 9, 2022 at 6:35 p.m. EDT

Washington Post

Next week, I’ll travel to the Middle East to start a new and more promising chapter of America’s engagement there. This trip comes at a vital time for the region, and it will advance important American interests.

A more secure and integrated Middle East benefits Americans in many ways. Its waterways are essential to global trade and the supply chains we rely on. Its energy resources are vital for mitigating the impact on global supplies of Russia’s war in Ukraine. And a region that’s coming together through diplomacy and cooperation — rather than coming apart through conflict — is less likely to give rise to violent extremism that threatens our homeland or new wars that could place new burdens on U.S. military forces and their families.

Avoiding that scenario is of paramount importance to me. I’ll pursue diplomacy intensely — including through face-to-face meetings — to achieve our goals.

The Middle East I’ll be visiting is more stable and secure than the one my administration inherited 18 months ago.

One month before my inauguration, our embassy in Baghdad faced the [largest rocket attack](https://www.wsj.com/articles/rocket-attack-on-u-s-embassy-in-baghdad-largest-in-a-decade-general-says-11608750520) in a decade. Attacks against our troops and diplomats had increased fourfold over the preceding year. My predecessor repeatedly [ordered B-52 bombers](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/30/us/politics/us-trump-iran.html) to fly from the United States to the region and back again to deter these attacks. But it didn’t work, and the attacks continued.

The war in Yemen was escalating, creating one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, with no political process in sight to end the fighting.

After my predecessor reneged on a nuclear deal that was working, Iran had passed a law mandating the rapid acceleration of its nuclear program. Then, when the last administration sought to condemn Iran for this action in the U.N. Security Council, the United States found itself isolated and alone.

In my first weeks as president, our intelligence and military experts warned that the region was dangerously pressurized. It needed urgent and intensive diplomacy. To restore deterrence, I ordered airstrikes in response to the attacks against our troops and began serious diplomatic outreach to bring about a more stable region.

In Iraq, we ended the U.S. combat mission and transitioned our military presence to focus on training Iraqis, while sustaining the global coalition against the Islamic State we forged when I was vice president, now dedicated to preventing ISIS from resurging.

We’ve also responded to threats against Americans. The frequency of Iranian-sponsored attacks compared with two years ago has dropped precipitously. And this past February, in Syria, we [took out ISIS leader](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/10/isis-qurayshi-raid/?itid=lk_inline_manual_16) Haji Abdullah, demonstrating America’s capability to eliminate terrorist threats no matter where they try to hide.

In Yemen, I named an envoy and engaged with leaders across the region, including with the king of Saudi Arabia, to lay the foundation for a truce. After a year of our persistent diplomacy, that truce is now in place, and lifesaving humanitarian assistance is reaching cities and towns that had been under siege. As a result, the past few months in Yemen have been the most peaceful in seven years.

With respect to Iran, we reunited with allies and partners in Europe and around the world to reverse our isolation; now it is Iran that is isolated until it returns to the nuclear deal my predecessor abandoned with no plan for what might replace it. Last month, more than 30 countries joined us to condemn Iran’s lack of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency on its past nuclear activities. My administration will continue to increase diplomatic and economic pressure until Iran is ready to return to compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal, as I remain prepared to do.

In Israel, we helped end a war in Gaza — which could easily have lasted months — in just [11 days](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinian-cease-fire-hamas-caac81bc36fe9be67ac2f7c27000c74b). We’ve worked with Israel, Egypt, Qatar and Jordan to maintain the peace without permitting terrorists to rearm. We also rebuilt U.S. ties with the Palestinians. Working with Congress, my administration restored approximately $500 million in support for Palestinians, while also passing the largest support package for Israel — over $4 billion — in history. And this week, an Israeli prime minister [spoke](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/08/middleeast/lapid-abbas-phone-call-intl/index.html) with the president of the Palestinian Authority for the first time in five years.

In Saudi Arabia, we reversed the blank-check policy we inherited. I released the intelligence community’s [report on the murder](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/khashoggi-killing-intelligence-report-release-mbs-saudi-arabia/2021/02/26/df5f6e58-7844-11eb-948d-19472e683521_story.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_23) of Jamal Khashoggi, issued new [sanctions](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0038), including on the Saudi Arabia’s Rapid Intervention Force involved in his killing, and issued [76 visa bans](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-khashoggi-ban/u-s-announces-khashoggi-ban-for-76-saudi-individuals-idUSKBN2AQ2SL) under a new rule barring entry into the United States for anyone found to be involved in harassing dissidents abroad. My administration has made clear that the United States will not tolerate extraterritorial threats and harassment against dissidents and activists by any government. We also advocated for American citizens who had been wrongfully detained in Saudi Arabia long before I took office. They have since been released, and I will continue to push for restrictions on their travel to be lifted.

From the start, my aim was to reorient — but not rupture — relations with a country that’s been a strategic partner for 80 years. Today, Saudi Arabia has helped to restore unity among the six countries of Gulf Cooperation Council, has fully supported the truce in Yemen and is now working with my experts to help stabilize oil markets with other OPEC producers.

I know that there are many who disagree with my decision to travel to Saudi Arabia. My views on human rights are clear and long-standing, and fundamental freedoms are always on the agenda when I travel abroad, as they will be during this trip, just as they will be in Israel and the West Bank.

As president, it is my job to keep our country strong and secure. We have to counter Russia’s aggression, put ourselves in the best possible position to outcompete China, and work for greater stability in a consequential region of the world. To do these things, we have to engage directly with countries that can impact those outcomes. Saudi Arabia is one of them, and when I meet with Saudi leaders on Friday, my aim will be to strengthen a strategic partnership going forward that’s based on mutual interests and responsibilities, while also holding true to fundamental American values.

On Friday, I will also be the first president to fly from Israel to Jiddah, Saudi Arabia. That travel will also be a small symbol of the budding relations and steps toward normalization between Israel and the Arab world, which my administration is working to deepen and expand. In Jiddah, leaders from across the region will gather, pointing to the possibility of a more stable and integrated Middle East, with the United States playing a vital leadership role.

Of course, the region remains full of challenges: Iran’s nuclear program and support for proxy groups, the Syrian civil war, food security crises exacerbated by Russia’s war against Ukraine, terrorist groups still operating in a number of countries, political gridlock in Iraq, Libya and Lebanon, and human rights standards that remain behind much of the world. We must address all these issues. When I meet with leaders from across the region, I will make clear how important it is to make progress in these areas.

Still, compared to 18 months ago, the region is less pressurized and more integrated. Former rivals have reestablished relations. Joint infrastructure projects are forging new partnerships. Iraq, which had long been a source of proxy conflicts and regional rivalries, now serves as a platform for diplomacy, including between Saudi Arabia and Iran. My friend King Abdullah of Jordan recently referred to the [“new vibe”](https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/24/jordans-king-says-he-would-support-a-middle-east-version-of-nato.html) in the region, with countries asking, “How can we connect with each other and work with each other.”

These are promising trends, which the United States can strengthen in a way no other country can. My travel next week will serve that purpose.

Throughout my journey, I’ll have in mind the millions of Americans who served in the region, including my son Beau, and the 7,054 who died in conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan since Sept. 11, 2001.

Next week, I will be the first president to visit the Middle East since 9/11 without U.S. troops engaged in a combat mission there. It’s my aim to keep it that way.